

Freedom in the Wilds

An Artist in the Adirondacks, Third Edition

Harold Weston, Edited by Rebecca Foster

Syracuse University Press, 2008 (272 pages)

Reviewed by MITCHELL GRUBER

In 1971 Harold Weston titled his quasi-memoir *Freedom in the Wilds: A Saga of the Adirondacks*, whereas the third edition, recently released by Syracuse University Press, has a subtly changed subtitle. *Freedom in the Wilds: An Artist in the Adirondacks* edited by Rebecca Foster—Weston's granddaughter—is a much improved and more focused book that deepens our understanding of the process by which an artist deliberately forged passionate affinities with nonhuman nature. The altered title is representative of the way this book has evolved. Weston attempted to write a long history of the land he knew best, the sublime and romantic high peaks in the eastern Adirondacks, but Foster's new edition focuses on the more cogent parts of his writing and the artist himself. The result is a book that includes many previously unreleased personal documents, which allow the reader to witness the intense relationships Weston developed in the early 1920s, including relationships with his art, with his future wife, and, perhaps most importantly, with the high peaks of the Adirondacks.

The great public intellectual and critic Lewis Mumford described Weston's painting as having "a touch of almost religious conviction." Anyone familiar with his paintings—and the book includes many beautiful color plates—would agree that his profoundly roman-

tic expressionism exudes passion. For example, Weston's *Giant Mountain Sunrise* immediately expresses the solitary witness's joy and humility in the face of a dramatic natural spectacle. Unlike images, which deliver their impact in a single blow, words create their effects in linear fashion. Foster's editing, therefore, accomplished two things: she meticulously selected the most valuable parts of Weston's writing, and, through the letters and journal entries, she allows the reader to see underneath the immediacy of his paintings and to witness how he earned his perspective through a deliberate process of accumulated experience.

For years Weston was known as the "Hermit of the Ausable Club," living in a small studio in complete solitude nearby the private reserve known as the Ausable Club, in the vicinity of St. Hubert's in the Keene Valley. Toward the end of his life the people at St. Hubert's and throughout Keene Valley persuaded Weston to write a history of the Ausable Club and its surroundings, as few people knew the region better than he. Almost four decades later, Foster watched as her grandfather's writing was rendered obsolete by the growing historiography of the Adirondacks and the private clubs within them. She successfully omitted the informal history and allowed the salient anecdotes to speak for themselves.

These stories are often about quotidian acts such as collecting firewood or water. The difficulties of living in remote solitude were exacerbated by the polio that had paralyzed Weston's right leg during childhood. Despite the many pleas from his family and friends, Weston insisted upon staying in St. Hubert's, and the reader learns about his subsistence living. The romantic Weston

did not move to Keene Valley to perform quotidian acts, however; rather he sought out confrontations with nature's most powerful forces. He longed for divine experiences. Stories such as "Night of Misery, Morning of Glory," in which Weston faced a miserable night atop Haystack Mountain, demonstrate the confrontations he desired. In the end he was rewarded with "the wild exuberance of the day and its successive orgasms of wilderness beauty." Stories such as this demonstrate why Weston remained in St. Hubert's for so long; he became a part of Keene Valley for the years he lived there. His art makes this abundantly clear, as his paintings blur the line between people and their environs. The reader can understand how Weston achieves this as a result of Foster's highlighting of specific stories. Additionally, the inclusion of nearly one hundred pages of journal entries and letters from the years Weston lived in St. Hubert's—something perhaps no one but Foster had the capability to access—vastly improves the unity of the third edition of *Freedom in the Wilds*.

The book transforms from an informal history of the entire six million acre Adirondack Park to a comprehensive chronicle of Weston's formative years, featuring the Adirondacks' most dramatic landscapes as a main character. The reader meets the struggling artist in solitude, where he uses a journal as his closest ally and confesses his uncertainties: "Am anxious not to force things and must admit not yet sure of my point of view." Most of the documents, however, profess love for Faith Borton. The original version of the book mentions Faith only a few times, but Foster added dozens of letters showing a romantic

Mitchell Gruber is a Ph.D. candidate in American history at the University of Rochester. He spent the summer of 2008 as a historic interpreter at the Sagamore Institute of the Adirondacks. He can be reached at mgruber@mail.rochester.edu.

Weston dealing with unrequited love. The parallels are deep: after initial reservations Weston becomes increasingly enamored with both Faith and the area surrounding St. Hubert's, but it takes time and dedication to become comfortable with, and loved by, either of them.

The letters and journal entries end just after Weston moves into painting nudes of Faith in 1924. Weston was so shaped by Keene Valley and his experiences as the Hermit of the Ausable Club that his nudes actually resembled his landscapes. In fact, they were labeled "landscape nudes" by critics and collectors. One of the last letters Foster included is from Harold to Faith while she is in a hospital after a toboggan accident. In the letter, Harold encourages Faith to explain his work to her Orthodox Quaker mother, who presumably disapproved of the landscape nudes: "Get her to see how trivialities, traditions, all but the essential, elementary, directly felt

and consequential to the inner existence, is swept away." Weston saw no difference between the divine experiences he sought with the environment of Keene Valley and with his wife. Without such letters that allow insight into his ideal-

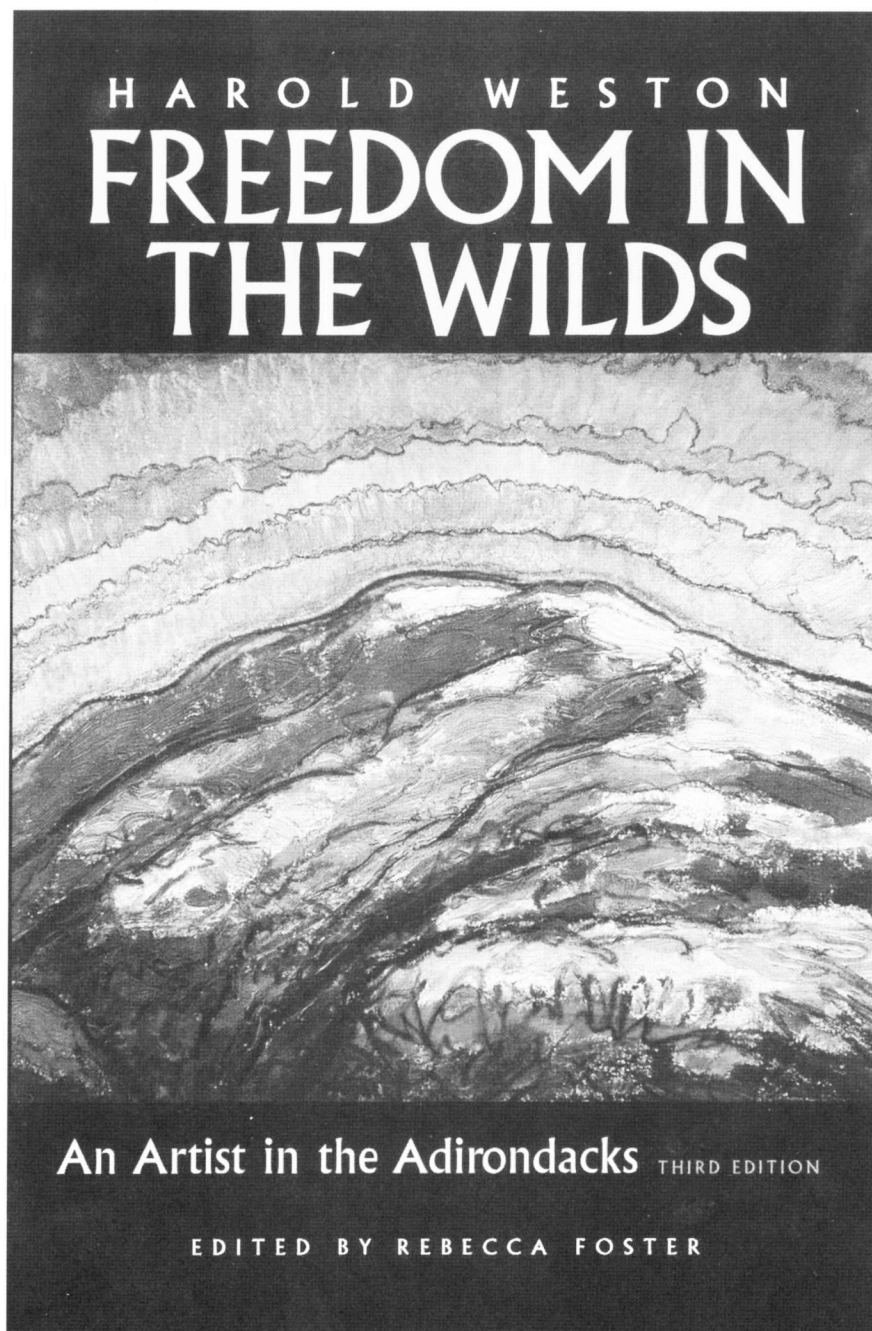
ogy, *Freedom in the Wilds* would be a basic autobiography; instead it allows the reader to understand how the artist earned his unique perspective through seeking dramatic experiences, from

the relationship between him and his wife, but in effect the book ends along with his year-round life in St. Hubert's. Only the brief note at the end of the volume mentions that Eleanor Roosevelt

stated "[Weston], more than anyone else, . . . was responsible for the original conception and carrying through of the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration." There are no journal entries or letters included from this post-World War II era. Weston was also instrumental in organizing the National Council on the Arts and Government, but the reader only discovers this in the brief note at the conclusion of the book. Granted, *Freedom in the Wilds* is the story of an artist in the Adirondacks, but there is no other source for Weston's journals or letters available in print. Considering how influential he was as an artist and as a liaison to the government, a full collection of letters and journals would be valuable.

Leaving the reader wanting

more, however, is not necessarily negative. In fact, it demonstrates the success of *Freedom in the Wilds*, a book that contributes to an understanding of Weston and the landscape that cultivated him as an artist.



Cover (original in color) reprinted with permission from Syracuse University Press

living in remote solitude to transforming unreciprocated love into a loving and successful marriage.

Foster succeeds in demonstrating the intensity of Weston and the high peaks towering over Keene Valley, as well as